Negation in Italian Sign Language (LIS)

Studies in several SLs have been made on negation (see among the others Pfau & Quer (2004)). As for Italian Sign Language (LIS, the language spoken by Deaf communities in Italy) no research has already been made within the generative framework (the variety of LIS under investigation is the one signed in the north district of Italy). In this paper I’ll show how negative sentences work in LIS. I’ll provide strong evidence for the Negative Criterion (Haegeman (1995), Rizzi (1996)) and I’ll argue that a positive counterpart of negation is available in LIS to reinforce assertive content. Data are collected from four different LIS native-speakers. In order to avoid influences from spoken Italian, various strategies that do not require spoken Italian input were used to elicit LIS sentences. All the data will be available on the Internet at the conference time.

First I’ll present some basic evidence to support the claim that LIS is an SOV language (capital letters are used to gloss word units in LIS): basic word order in a simple declarative sentence (1); position of modals (2); position of aspectual markers like DONE, which indicate that the action is completed (3); position of determiners, which typically occur post nominally (4); centre clausal embedding is not possible, though: complements appear either in the left or in the right periphery of the matrix clause (5); positive meaning can be reinforced by a particular non manual marking (NMM), namely head nod that spreads over a wide part of the sentence (6a) or over a restricted domain (6b).

In the second part I’ll show the pattern of negation in LIS. In LIS, as well as in other SLs, there are various ways to express negation (manually and non manually). However, manual negation appears at the end of the sentence (7). Differently from other SLs already studied (e.g. ASL, see Neidle et al.(2000)), negation in LIS (like in Chinese SL, see Yang & Fisher (2001)) cannot be expressed by NMM only (a side to side head movement). Namely, manual negation must obligatorily appear in negative sentences, cf (8) in which brackets mean any possible spreading of the NMM. However, negation can be expressed either by a specific sign (a negative marker like in (7) above) or by a sign where the negation is incorporated (9). Note that negation cannot be incorporated by full verbs. Incorporation is possible only with some modals (10). Another important characteristic of LIS negation is the impossibility of having two different signs to express negation in the same clause. In this sense, LIS does not have negative concord with manual signs, like English and unlike Italian (11).

Negation appears after modals (12). N-words (like nobody and nothing) are sentence final (13). Finally I’ll sketch a possible explanation for all the data including the distribution of the negative NMM. I’ll argue that a functional projection (NegP) is available above the IP. NegP introduces a feature that must be check by Spell Out. In order for this feature to be checked, there must be negative manual material either in the head of NegP (the case of incorporation, cf (9)) or in its specifier (the case of NON, cf (7)). Once NegP is filled, a spec-head relation is triggered and the negative NMM spreads over the material in NegP to realize the agreement relation. Thus, the negative NMM does not spread over other clause portions. Notice that the system makes a precise prediction: negative quantifiers must move into Spec, NegP to check the negative feature, if no other manual material is present in NegP. The prediction is confirmed by the minimal pair in (13) and is a strong support for the Negative Criterion Hypothesis.

In complementary distribution with the negative NMM, it is possible to find a positive (head nod) NMM. This NMM represents a positive counterpart of the negative NMM. Its contribute is to reinforce the assertive character of the sentence. I’ll assume that the positive NMM spreads from a Positive Phrase (PosP), which is in complementary distribution with the NegP. Differently from negation, there is no positive manual counterpart of negative signs like “NOT”, neither there is a positive counterpart of negative incorporation. Since there is no manual material readily available to fill PosP, no agreement relation occurs. As a consequence of this, NMM spreads over wider domains in (6b). However, if for some reason the head of PosP is filled, the realization of the agreement relation regularly occurs as in (6a). A further prediction is that if some extra assertive meaning needs to be expressed with positive quantifiers (someone, something) there should be a movement to Spec, PosP, which parallels N-words movement to Spec, NegP, as the minimal pair in (14) confirms.

Thus, it’s possible to determine the correct distribution of negative and positive NMM in LIS. The behaviour of negative quantifiers and their positive counterpart is accounted for.
Examples:
(1) GIANNI MARIA LOVE (Gianni loves Maria)
(2) GIANNI 180cm JUMP CAN (Gianni can jump 180 cm)
(3) GIANNI HOUSE BUY DONE (Gianni bought a house)
(4) STUDENT THREE ARRIVE DONE (Three students arrived)
(5) a. GIANNI ARRIVE DONE YOU SAY (You say that Gianni arrived)
    b. YOU SAY GIANNI ARRIVE DONE (You say that Gianni arrived)
(6) a. GIANNI CONTRACT SIGN DONE (Gianni did sign the contract)
    b. GIANNI LEAVE WANT (Gianni does want to leave)
(7) a. GIANNI CONTRACT SIGN NOT (Gianni has not signed the contract)
    b. GIANNI CONTRACT SIGN NOT-YET (Gianni has not signed the contract yet)
    c. GIANNI CONTRACT SIGN NEVER (Gianni has never signed the contract)
(8) * GIANNI CONTRACT SIGN (Gianni has not signed the contract)
(9) GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT CANNOT (Gianni can’t built the wardrobe)
(10) a. * GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT-NOT (Gianni doesn’t want to build the wardrobe)
    b. GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT WANT-NOT (Gianni doesn’t want to build the wardrobe)
    c. GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT NOT (*NEVER)
    d. GIANNI CONTRACT SING NEVER (*NOT)
(11) a. GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT NEVER (Paolo has never signed the contract)
(12) a. GIANNI WARDROBE BUILT CAN NOT (Gianni can’t sign the contract)
    b. GIANNI TICKET BUY NEED NOT (Gianni has not to buy the ticket)
(13) a. SOMEONE ARRIVE (Someone arrived)
    b. ARRIVE NOBODY (Nobody arrived)
(14) a. CONTRACT SIGN SOMEONE (Someone did sign the contract)
    b. * CONTRACT SIGN SOMEONE

References:
R. Pfau, J. Quer (2004). “Negative modals in signed languages: from T to Neg and further up.” Paper
presented at the 14th Colloquium on Generative Grammar, Oporto, Portugal.